Ragsdale Hits Ford Job On Assassination Panel

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WASHINGTON — Duncan Ragsdale, the Republican opponent of Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis, said Wednesday Ford has not been doing a good job as a member of the House Assassinations Committee.

He made the remarks as the committee began hearing testimony from James Earl Ray in the investigation of the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.

Ragsdale sat in the rear of the committee room during the testimony as a special guest of Mark Lane, Ray's attorney.

Ragsdale said he may also represent Ed Redditt, a former black policeman from Memphis, who was assigned in 1968 to guard Dr. King.

Redditt has been subpened to Washington and could testify today if Ray's testimony ends in time, or possibly on Friday. Ragsdale said the last time he talked to Redditt he was asked to represent him at the hearing, but other sources report Redditt won't use the Memphis lawyer.

Lane and Ragsdale both appeared before the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia Wednesday afternoon on a writ of habeus corpus they filed in behalf of Ray asking the court to remove Ray from the custody of the U.S. marshals and to investigate charges that Ray was abused at the federal penitentiary in Virginia before he testified Wednesday morning.

Lane said he visited Ray in his cell at Petersburg, Va., Tuesday night, where he said Ray was kept in a "punitive cell and in solitary confinement, kept under constant surveillance and kept under lights constantly since his arrival in Virginia."

He said Ray had been "subjected to such violent treatment as renders him incapable of eating."

The federal court late Wednesday ordered U.S. marshals to carefully guard Ray to protect him from abuse.

Ragsdale is a lawyer for Grace Walden Stephens, who has claimed she saw the slayer of Dr. King flee from the Memphis rooming house on April 4, 1968. She has been confined for nearly 10 years as a psychiatric patient at Western Mental Health Institute in Bolivar, Tenn.

Ragsdale said Wednesday that is partly the reason he attended hearings as well as Redditt.

He said another reason is to talk to national Republican officials about his campaign against Ford this fall.

Ragsdale blasted Ford for not "showing any interest" in Lane's charges that the committee has violated its own rules and the federal law in its investigation.

Lane accosted Ford Tuesday in the committee room and invited him to talk privately with him about his charges.

Ragsdale said Ford has not responded.

Ragsdale also said that when Redditt testified in secret sessions in Washington in April, he was asked by committee chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) if he was going to run against Ford this fall. He said three days later Redditt's testimony was leaked to the press. Ragsdale said he suspects Ford may have engineered that leak.

The Memphis lawyer said he thinks Ford may turn to ask a lot of questions of Redditt if he testifies.

"I'm not going to concern myself with the politics of this thing," Ford snapped outside the committee room. "What I want to know is the truth in the hearing."

With Lane at the hearing was Rev. James M. Lawson of Los Angeles, who was chairman of the stragegy committee for the sanitation strikers in Memphis 10 years ago.

Lawson is supporting a new trial for Ray through an attempt to organize ministers.

He carried a letter purportedly written by Ray from Brushy Mountain Prison in Tennessee on July 21.

"I did not kill Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.," the letter said. "I believe that the evidence that I can give you about how I was used, moved around the country, paid substantial sums of money, directed to buy a rifle and directed to report to Memphis on April 4, 1968, will be helpful in establishing the fact that there was a conspiracy to murder Dr. King."

The letter said Lane and Ray know of provisions in the Tennessee law which require Ray to get a new trial.

"But since the decision to deny me a trial — really a decision to deny the American people the truth about the murder of Dr. King — was political, I think that only political action can change that determination," the letter said.

"I could tell you that I loved Dr. King and pretend that my primary interest is to make all of the facts known to the American people," the letter said. "In reality I did not know Dr. King, never thought about him until I was accused of murdering him and in fact I never even mentioned his name while he was alive.

"It has been said that I am a racist," the letter added. "In our society maybe everyone is a racist. The events in Boston may prove that."

The letter thanked Lawson and others, including Memphis religious leaders, who have called for Grace Walden's release and a new trial for Ray.

"Since Memphis is a lot closer than Moscow I ask you to meet with President Carter and ask him to request that I be given a trial," the letter said. "At that trial I am sure I will be able to prove that I am innocent and the secret FBI files which we will see at that trial lead to the real murderers.

"I have said for 10 years that I'm sure that the FBI files hold the answers to the questions about the assassination of Dr. King," the letter said. "Those trials in Moscow may be unfair and completely political but at least the defendants there have a trial. For 10 years that is all that I have asked for, even though I understand that if convicted at that trial, I might very well be sentenced to death."